Looming weight on young shoulders

The children of today will have to support many more non-working elderly people than their parents, if current trends continue. In the first of a two-part series on population issues, Insight looks at what a shrinking old-age support ratio means for the city state.

**Amrit at 90**

Amrit was 90 last year. He is one of the few who can still recall Singapore’s independence from Britain. "I used to sell fruit and vegetables," says Amrit, whose late wife ran a stall on the roadside. "At that time I would wake up at 5 a.m. to sell fruit. Today it’s just a commodity."

Amrit and his wife, who passed away in 2002, were typical Singaporeans of their time. They brought up their family and helped their children financially. Their children, in turn, moved to the west, leaving them alone. "I don’t want to be a burden to them," says Amrit.

**A difficult choice**

As population ages, non-working elderly people will be an increasing percentage of the population and the working-age population will shrink. This will pose a challenge to the government’s ability to maintain the current level of public spending on health, education and social services.

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The Singapore government has perennially emphasized the importance of increasing the birth rate. "Government will continue to promote family planning. The worry is that the government is not doing enough," says a retired civil servant.

What about the elderly? "They are on their own, with no one to take care of them," says a retired civil servant.

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If Singaporeans do not start having more children, the country will face a growing elderly population that will require more social security. "I don’t want to pay more taxes to support the old people," says a retired civil servant.

**Options available**

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**Assets or liabilities?**

If the share of foreigners in the workforce rises, it could lead to higher productivity and real wage growth. "It is a choice between doing nothing and doing something," says a retired civil servant.

**Mental health is also a concern**

As people live longer, many elderly people face health problems. "It is a difficult situation for the elderly," says a retired civil servant.

**Better health care**

The government needs to ensure that elderly people receive better health care. "They need to be taken care of," says a retired civil servant.

**Outlook**

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